

New Orleans 1987  
Nathaniel Syndrome

(1)

THE NATHANIEL SYNDROME  
[GREATER THINGS]

See also 3) ✓  
S. Y. G. 1/2

John 1: 43-50; 14:12

When Jesus went looking for disciples he had no problems finding his first five, but he did have trouble with the sixth. John's Gospel calls that sixth disciple Nathaniel; Matthew, Mark and Luke call him Bartholomew; I call him a Presbyterian. I know that that's the kind of exegesis that Bible scholars discourage, but there is something about Nathaniel when we first see him here that sounds like a Presbyterian to me.

Listen to how John describes him. He tells how Jesus, after his baptism in the Jordan River came back to Galilee with Peter and Andrew, and found Philip. He said, "Follow me", and Philip followed him. No problem. Then Philip went to look for a friend of his who might make a good disciple. And as John reports it (1:45,46):

"Philip went to find Nathaniel and told him, 'We have met the man spoken of by Moses in the Law, and by the prophets: ..Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth.' 'Nazareth!' exclaimed Nathaniel; 'can anything good come from Nazareth?'"

So the encounter began with a question, and the wrong question at that!

I. "Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth"

How Presbyterian! Of course Presbyterians don't put it quite that way. They say, "Can anything good come out of New York?" or "Can anything good come out of Atlanta?" And lately, with a new twist, "Can anything good come out of Kansas City?" We have turned into a denomination of Nathaniels, grumpy, and divided, asking ourselves "Can anything good come out of our Presbyterian church anymore?".

I don't want to be too hard on Nathaniel. One of the things I like best about Presbyterians is that they are not afraid to ask hard questions, even about their church. Theologically I have no quarrel with a healthy Calvinistic skepticism about the perfectability of human nature. Our own Book of Order has always admitted that popes and councils may err, which goes for presbyteries and General Assemblies too. But Calvin always balanced the hard questions about human

frailties with a saving touch of wondering acceptance of the mysteries of God's grace. What I like about this encounter of Nathaniel with Jesus is the way it moves from question to mystery, and from mystery to challenge: from the question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth; to the mystery, "Come and see"; to the challenge of "greater things" ahead. "You will see greater things, and do greater things than these."

Begin with the questions, Nathaniel's and ours: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"; "Can anything good come from the Presbyterian church?"

There was a time when Presbyterians didn't ask loaded questions like that. They expected great things of their church in spite of its obvious faults simply because they believed it to be in truth "the house of God", and a means of grace. There was a time when this whole country expected great things of Presbyterians. The only clergyman asked to sign the Declaration of Independence was Princeton's Presbyterian president, John Witherspoon, and Englishmen were calling the American revolution "a Presbyterian conspiracy". We liked that. We were the strong, self-reliant, independence-minded Calvinistic backbone of a great, new, free country.

Then somehow, things began to slip. Americans moved away from us. I could argue--though I know it would be a drastic oversimplification of America's Protestant history--that the 18th century (1776 and all that) was the Presbyterian or at least the Calvinist century in America, and the 19th century was more of a Methodist century, and the 20th century became a Baptist century, and, if we dare turn recklessly prophetic, I could say that the 21st century might turn out to be Pentecostal, much to our mainline denominational surprise.

So the fact that there is a tide of discontent rumbling through the mainline churches should not come as much of a shock. I read in a recent Presbyterian Outlook (Apr.27,1987, p.7) of a top-level research project now in process asking why the great, "once-prominent religious bodies", like the Presbyterians, have shrunk so sharply in stature and influence, particularly in the last few years. The scholars involved, historians and theologians, are asking "What has happened to the Presbyterians?"

Well, for one thing we are hemorrhaging to death. We lose about 40,000 members every year, and have been for more years than I care to count. In just the last 20 years (since 1966), we've lost one-third of the members of our church, and that is only the most visible symptom of an across-the-board vote of lack of confidence. I have been told that two out of three of all the Presbyterians this country has elected to the present Congress say they are not happy with our much-publicized Presbyterian pronouncements on church and society. Another poll tells me that whereas 20 years ago, six out of every 100 Americans still preferred the Presbyterian church; today only two out of 100 Americans pick Presbyterianism as their preference (Presb. Outlook, March 23, 1987, p. 8). That represents eight million Americans who once called themselves pro-Presbyterian, but who now are disenchanted and are looking elsewhere. When our entire membership is only three million, how can we afford to alienate eight million?

I could go on. What do we have to celebrate about in this 150th anniversary year of nationally organized Presbyterian church world missions? Presbyterians today give more of their money to non-Presbyterian overseas missions than to their own General Assembly's mission work. And more Presbyterians are going overseas as missionaries outside of our Presbyterian agencies than through them.

150 years ago we started with 44 missionaries, mostly inherited from the work among American Indians (native Americans) which the newly formed Board of Foreign Missions in 1837 took over from former independent, regional Presbyterian missionary societies. In the first fifty years of our church mission, from 1827 to 1887, the number of missionaries leaped upward from 44 to 510. By 1937, in the second fifty years it had continued its climb, from 501 to 1,305 (in the northern branch of our now reunited church). That was the time to celebrate. But in the next fifty years, our fifty years, missionary personnel almost dropped off the graph. Between 1937 and 1987 the number of Presbyterian career missionaries serving under our church fell from 1,305 to only 445 (even with reunion adding 179 from Atlanta to New York's 266).

This is the litany of discontent that I hear over and over again from Presbyterians. We sound like Nathaniels, disapproving,



dissatisfied and disillusioned. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?". It's the Nathaniel syndrome, and we Presbyterians have caught the disease.

But the good news is that it's not fatal. All this doom and gloom somehow reminds me of the time my mother-in-law found her 91 year-old mother-in-law following a television program which was giving German lessons over the air. "But mother," she said, "what in the world are you doing trying to learn German at your age?" Grandmother didn't bat an eye. "Well," she snapped, "I'm not dead till I die." What a woman!

It startled Fileen's mother, who is 91 herself now, into taking a second look at grandmother. And we'd better take another look at Nathaniel, for my text doesn't stop with that ill-tempered question of his, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?". It's time to put aside the questions and move on to the mysteries of God's grace. No, not quite. The questions should not be brushed aside. They are valid questions. So was Nathaniel's. If what he meant was "Can the Messiah come out of Nazareth?" that was not a bad question, for he must have known the prophecies that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth. In much the same way our questions about the church are also substantial questions. We Presbyterians will always be asking questions, and should keep on asking questions, but we must not let ourselves drown in them. Above all, we must not lose hope. <sup>Were 150 years old in mission - and we've lived down all our life, but</sup> We're not dead till we die!

So let's move beyond the questions and enter again into what Karl Barth used to call "the strange, new world of the Bible". Listen to how Philip deals with Nathaniel's cranky question. He simply said, "Come and see", and he took him to Jesus. (John 1:46).

## II. "Come and See."

That's all it took. No argument, just an invitation, "Come and see". The question about Nazareth was still in the air, but Philip didn't answer it, at least not directly. He didn't take Nathaniel to Nazareth. He brought him to Jesus. At Nazareth Nathaniel would only have found more things to criticize; just as, if you pushed me, I could find many more things than declining membership or missions

statistics that I don't like about the Presbyterian church. But Philip's way is better. He saw that Nathaniel had asked the wrong question in the wrong way, so Philip simply turned the question away from Nazareth... and brought the questioner to Jesus. *And I want to turn the Presbyterian question away from N.Y. & Atlanta & Kansas City*  
 Now what occurred next is a mystery, and I want to meet it head-on. John says that as Nathaniel came toward Jesus, the Nazarene looked at him, in what must have been a disconcertingly direct way. Perhaps Nathaniel began to regret the ugly remark he had made about the man's home town. But Jesus, instead of saying, "What's that you said about Nazareth?", welcomed him warmly and said, "You're an honest man, an Israelite worthy of the name," which must have surprised Nathaniel, though I'm sure it didn't displease him. "How do you know about me?" he said. And Jesus said, "I saw you under the fig tree even before Philip spoke to you".

Now Nathaniel knew he couldn't have seen him; Jesus wasn't even there. It was a miracle, and Presbyterians don't go in much for miracles nowadays. But I wonder whether this might not be a part of our problem. *And I want to turn the Presbyterian question away from Atlanta, N.Y. & Kansas City and remind you that as Jesus came from Nazareth, the H.S. can still work through the Presb. Chh.*  
 If we take the mystery out of the Christian faith we suck it dry and crush it flat and leave it dead. If we cease to believe in the substance of faith, <sup>12</sup> "things that are not seen", as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, then "the things that are seen" lose meaning and purpose. The world may say, "The realist doesn't believe in miracles". But the real world of the Bible says,--with Dr. Weizmann, the first president of the State of Israel,-- "Anyone who doesn't believe in miracles is not a realist." We think realism is believing our experience. But C.S. Lewis argues that people who don't believe in God wouldn't recognize a miracle if they saw one. To recognize a miracle takes two things, said Lewis, first, a belief in a normal stability of nature.. and secondly, a belief in some reality beyond nature", at least beyond what we call Nature now. (God in the Dock, p. 27). Why is that so hard to believe? We're in a new "age of discovery" which is rolling back the boundaries of our knowledge like an ever expanding circle of firecrackers, inwards and outwards, pushing us beyond the little regularities of Nature as we know it now to the unforeseen irregularities we are only beginning to explore in the microcosms and

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megacosms of God's universe. Besides, I believe in miracles because I believe in the two greatest miracles, the Incarnation and the Resurrection. I'm glad I belong to the Presbyterian church and can preach Christ at Christmas, not Santa Claus, and at Easter can shout "Christ is risen" instead of wasting my time explaining to the children how bunnies can lay chicken eggs.

But I must remember that Philip didn't argue about Nazareth, and I mustn't argue about miracles. Not everything that is called a miracle is a miracle in the precise sense. Even Jesus didn't seem to want to make too much about this miracle. It was Nathaniel, the old skeptic, who got excited. He almost shouted at the man from the town he despised, "You are the Son of God." Jesus had to cool him down. Nathaniel, like many a sudden convert, had turned from the wrong doubts to the wrong reason for belief, and Jesus said, "Do you believe in me just because I said I saw you under the fig tree? You are going to see greater things than that"..., and later, much later when he was bidding his disciples farewell, he added, "[And] you are going to do greater things than these." (Jn. 14:12)

This whole passage, which started with a loaded question, and built up to a minor miracle, ends with the greatest challenge ever given to those who call themselves followers of Jesus: "Greater things than these shall you see.... and do". "Greater things". We loosely call them miracles, but more accurately they are just what Jesus called them, "greater things"

### III. "Greater Things"

Begin with the "greater thing" that happened right there. Nathaniel found his Lord in the man from Nazareth. If Nathaniel the cynic could find the Lord in Nazareth, why shouldn't I be able to find him in the Presbyterian church? As a matter of fact I did. Or better, that is where He found me. And if Jesus could take a small-minded doubter like Nathaniel and turn him into a believer, and from a believer into a disciple, an apostle, I believe he can take Presbyterians like us, with all our still unanswered questions, or unquestioning enthusiasms, and show us where we can be a part of the "greater things" he sends us to do in and through the church. But for that we are going to have to

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get our goals in focus and sharpen our priorities. We must no longer be passive partners in mission. We must shoulder our share of the initiative in this global partnership we call the Christian Mission.

I asked a while ago, "What have we to celebrate?" after 150 years of Presbyterian missions. We are celebrating 150 years of the "greater things", Presbyterians did when we were more unashamedly active in mission. *When we were sending out missionaries and evangelists all across this nation and out into the world.*

*Presbyterian* Robert Morrison was one of those doers of the "greater things," even before we American Presbyterians got into the act. On his way from England to China in 1807, as the first Protestant missionary to that vast land, the ship's captain, as skeptical as Nathaniel and with a question as wrong as Nathaniel's, sneered, "Mr. Morrison, do you really think you can make any impression on the great Chinese Empire." "No sir," said that good Presbyterian Morrison, "but God will". Seven years later Morrison still had not made a single convert; after 25 years there were only 10,-- 10 converts out of 200 million Chinese. A lesser man might have lost hope and gone back to the questions, "Can anything good come out of all this? We're banging our heads against the Great Wall". But year after year he kept on working at his translation of the Bible into Chinese. *He never had hundreds of new Christians report back home.* He never saw the "great things"; Or rather, he didn't recognize the "greater thing" he was already doing, translating the Bible into characters of a language read by more millions than any other language on the face of the earth. Thanks to him, and to others of our own Presbyterian missions, we have been a key part of the doing of that "greater thing", the translation of the word of God. There was A.I. Good of the Cameroons, twenty-three years translating 39 of the Old Testament books into Bulu; and Burgess and Peck of Guatemala wrestling with the problem of how to put the New Testament into the Mam language, a tongue which sounds to outsiders like nothing so much as an explosion of grunts and coughs. How do you write a grunt? But they did it. missionaries.

And there are many others. There's Ben Weir, who taught us what it really means to love our enemies. Of all the "greater things" I think that is the hardest and perhaps the greatest. And Norval Christie, of India, who has opened more eyes of the blind than even our Lord. I ~~have~~ believe Dr. Christie has performed as many as four hundred

cataract operations in one day, and in his own lifetime has saved the sight of more than eighteen thousand people sinking into sightless darkness. And there is Ralph Winter and Jim Emery and Ross Kinsler whose "theological education by extension" revolution took the seminary out of the classroom in <sup>great</sup> strategic sections of the third world and brought the training of the ministry to the people waiting to be trained.

Two of the most significant "greater things" have been happening almost unnoticed before our own eyes. One is the globalization of the Christian faith, and the other is the restoring of the racial wholeness of the Christian church. They are miracles in process, not miracles achieved, but Presbyterians have counted heavily in both.

By 1942 at the beginning of World War II we began to realize that for the first time in history Christianity had not only circled the globe but had penetrated with increasing power into every major division of the human race.

"It is only rarely," wrote Stephen Neill the missions historian (Hist. of Christian Missions, p.559), "that it is possible in the history of the church or in the history of the world, to speak of anything as being unmistakably new. But in the 20th century one phenomenon has come into view which is incontestably new--for the first time there is in this world a universal religion, and that is the Christian religion"

It is a still unfolding miracle, and it is not finished. There are still pockets of the unreached, and there are still Presbyterians trying to reach them through what our church calls Presbyterian Frontier Missions, <sup>which</sup> ~~We need more~~ focussing <sup>is</sup> on concrete strategies and personnel needs and budget priorities for this urgent, uncompleted task. "Greater things you shall do", said Jesus, and we must claim the promise.

The other equally startling and largely unheralded phenomemon of our times is what I call "the browning of the family of God". Sometime between 1981 and 1982 for the first time in 1300 years the color of Christians world-wide became no longer the color white. Christianity could no more be stigmatized by its opponents as "the white



man's religion". The church has broken through the color bars, and the variegated colors of health has been restored in the body of Christ. For the first time in 13 centuries more than 50% of the Christians of the world are black and brown and red and tan and yellow. The sign of the rainbow has been given once again to the Christian church. We are a "rainbow coalition".

One thing about that miracle that most Presbyterians have forgotten is that one of the most important steps in the process was a day back in 1889 when Samuel Lapsley, born in Selma, Alabama, white, and William H. Shepperd of Atlanta, Georgia, black, were appointed by southern Presbyterians as a team to pioneer a Presbyterian mission in the Congo (now Zaire). That was almost a hundred years ago; the War between the States was still a bitter memory, but black and white, Shepperd and Lapsley went out as one team, united in Christ, and so great a wonder that on the way to mission in Africa they were invited to meet the president of the United States in the White House (Life and Letters of Samuel Norvell Lapsley, 1893, p.21). What a great beginning for "greater things".

And then there is my own father. In the same year that Lapsley and Shepperd went to Africa, father went to Korea. He went to Korea's "Nazareth", the town of Pyongyang in north Korea. It was a city of flies, and child prostitutes and tiger hunters. "Can anything good come out of Pyongyang?" the people said. They stoned him in the streets, when he first tried to live there. The interior was forbidden territory for foreign residence. He started a little seminary, the first in Korea, and one of the seven graduates in its first class, in 1907, was the man who led the mob which had stoned him in the streets sixteen years earlier. This led to "greater things". When that class of seven men was ordained, becoming the first ordained Protestant ministers in the whole country, they sent the man who had stoned the first missionary he saw to be their own first Korean missionary.

When father landed in Korea, in the whole peninsula there were not much more than a hundred baptized Protestant Christians. Today Korea has a community of ten million Christians, Catholic and Protestant, and more than half of them, more than five million are Presbyterians. That may not be a miracle, but it is surely one of the

"greater things", and it is something worth celebrating in this anniversary year. That's more Presbyterians, I think, than we have in America. And much more important, these are our new partners in mission. We must begin to factor into our missionary statistics these new partners of ours, Asian missionaries, African missionaries (the country today in the third world that sends out the most missionaries is Nigeria), and Latin American missionaries.

So don't come to me with "Can anything good come out of the Presbyterian church?" I would answer like Philip, "Come and see", and I would take you to meet our new partners in Korea and India and Indonesia, in Kenya and Guatemala, in Nepal and Nigeria; and then I'd want to bring them to see some things in Appalachia and Maine, in Atlanta and New York and Kansas City, in Princeton and Richmond, in Southern California and North Dakota. "Greater things" are happening right around us and we don't recognize them.

But first, I'd have to be true to my text and say to all our global partners in mission, new and old, here and over there, "Come to Jesus". If there are indeed to be any "greater things" for us to do in our day, and any miracles, they will have to begin with Him, the who says to us as he said to Nathaniel, "You will see greater things than these".

I wonder if I should tell you in closing about how all this was made very real to me years ago when I was leaving China. I went through it all, from discouragement, to mystery, and on to see "the greater things".

I was on trial in communist China. That was back in 1951, two years after the revolution had rolled over me. The charge against me was embezzlement. That was how they were forcing the missionaries out of China then. They couldn't deport us as missionaries for there was a religious liberty clause in the constitution, so they had to use criminal charges against us, usually espionage, or immorality or misuse of funds. I knew I was going to be found guilty; the only question was "What will the sentence be?" I was extremely tense and nervous when the packed crowd shouted "Guilty", and the communist major who was presiding stood up to pronounce judgment. He said, "The sentence is immediate

deportation as an enemy of the Chinese people". I breathed a great sigh of relief. Then the guards led me out into a small room where they told me I must leave town the next day for the border two or three days away by train. I jumped up to go and pack. "But wait, they said. "Before you go you must sign this paper. You will be allowed to take only \$100 in American money. It is against the law to carry American money but this will authorize you to take \$100 with you. Sign it, and we will put our chops on it to make it legal." I signed it quickly and raced home. But when I got home I couldn't find \$100 in the house. I looked everywhere, and there was only \$97. In the pressures of the last few days I had gotten a little paranoid, and suddenly the suspicion occurred to me: it's a trap; they made me sign that paper because during the trial they must have sent their agents to make sure I didn't have \$100. Now somewhere between Nanking and Canton they'll check my money. The papers will say I'm carrying \$100. I'll only be able to come up with \$97. They'll accuse me of bribing my way out with the missing \$3. And who knows what will happen to me where nobody can see or hear.

On the way to the station the next day, a China Inland Mission missionary and his wife were waiting on the street to say goodbye, and they stopped us and asked if we would take their 8 year-old boy Oswald with us. He doesn't need papers, they said, and we don't know when we'll be able to leave. Won't you take him?" Of course we did.

At the station in Canton, on the China side of the border, they opened our bags, turned them upside down and dumped the contents in the dirt, shoving our things around with their feet to show their contempt for "enemies of the people". Then they began to body search the passengers. Oswald watched what they were doing, and came up to me. "Uncle Sam," he said, "are they going to examine me like that?" "Yes," I said, "but you don't have to worry." "But I have some money," he said. "Not enough to worry about, Oswald," I said. "But it's American money". That was a worry. "Do you have a permit to carry it?" "No", he said. "Oswald," I said. "How much do you have?" "Three dollars," he said. And I had that three dollars out of his pocket and into mine so fast you wouldn't believe it.  $3 + 97 = 100$ . The \$100 my permit said I was carrying, I was carrying.



Now you can call that a coincidence if you want to, but to me it was a miracle. Don't misunderstand me. I don't believe in miracles because of that \$3. I already believed in miracles. And I don't believe God plays favorites with his miracles, throwing a little one my way because of my great faith. I didn't have great faith at that moment. I knew very well that there were better Christians than I, missionary and Chinese, still being held back there, and no such miracle for them, except the miracle of faith and courage which God gives to those who are faithful even unto death.

As for me, I was a still a Nathaniel, not a skeptic but so completely wiped out, discouraged at the failure of all my missionary dreams that God must have said to himself, "I can't let a disciple of mine leave China like that", so he worked a very small miracle, a \$3 miracle, to remind he was still there. I was about to leave thinking, "Can anything good happen now in China"?, and in this small way God  
 \* chose repeat his promise to the Nathaniels of this world. To me then, and to any of you Presbyterians now who have surrendered to discouragement, He says, "Don't believe because of the miracles. Believe in me, and you will see greater things than these".

And you will. I did. I can't say I did greater things, but I saw them. I saw the resurrection of the church in China. There was not a church left open after the ten terrible years of the cultural revolution. Today the fastest growing church on earth is the Chinese church: 4,000 churches open, and some say 40,000 house churches holding meetings.

And I watched a miracle happen before my eyes in Korea. Where else in the world will you find a downtown Presbyterian church with a congregation of 60,000 members? I'm not talking about a Baptist church; I'm talking about a Presbyterian church.

And now I am looking at the Presbyterian church in the United States of America. Of course you have problems. So does the church in China. So does the church in Korea. But we're not dead till we die. And God can still work miracles, and his people can still do "greater things". He was talking to Nathaniel, that Presbyterian look-alike, when he said, "You will see greater things..., and you will do greater things". Just one condition. Look again at the text (Jn. 14:12), "He

(or she) who believes in me will do the very deeds I do, and still greater deeds than these. For I am going to the Father, and I will do whatever you ask in my name". Just that one condition: "Believe in me"; but that is something we all can do. Even Presbyterians. Nathaniel did. And if we can believe a very old tradition, as I would like to believe it, Nathaniel stopped complaining about Nazareth and became a missionary. To India.

-- Samuel Hugh Moffett  
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May 2, 1987